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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the pitfalls and success of distance learning programs. The report covers instructional alternatives of telecourse, linked courses, computer-aided learning, correspondence courses, and audio/video instruction. Sixteen concerns for distance learning programs are identified; for example: (1) registration procedures for distance learning courses; (2) student isolation; (3) student procrastination; (4) students may not have necessary educational resources in or near their home; (5) mailed in work may get lost or delayed; (6) audio/video equipment problems; and (7) providing students effective and timely feedback. Distance learning instructors have to make sure that students have the right materials for the course, which is hard because students are not seen. Distance learning courses also have to secure computer lab hours on campus for students without necessary equipment at home. E-mails and phone calls are viewed solely as options to improve communication between students and teachers. Overall, distance learning programs provide a viable alternative to in-class instruction and skill development. They can help educate students with different learning styles; however, these programs also require extra work and time on the part of the instructor. (MKF)

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Pitfalls and Success of Distance Learning

by
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Presentation Description:
This presentation covered instructional alternatives of telecourse, linked courses, computer aided learning, competency based/critical thinking as correspondence courses, video/audio instruction as correspondence. Successful approaches, not-so-successful, instructional "Glitches" and student difficulties were addressed. How to approach education when the student is not "in person" - isolation, procrastination, lack of available resources in the 'home" community, time-line, "in-house" problems of timeliness of materials, response concerns were presented. The issue of training instructors to "teach" in unfamiliar technologies, distant site concerns, and classroom "control" for distance learning sites was also discussed.

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Pitfalls and Success of Distance Learning
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Classroom instruction can take many forms these days. In the Interpreter Training program at Spokane Falls community College, we are using as many alternative delivery systems as possible in addition to the on-campus competency based and/or critical thinking classrooms and labs to serve the wide variety of student needs. Our previous style was primarily lecture and "oral" or written (visual for sign language) evaluation. Over the last five or six years, however, we have incorporated telecourse, linked courses, computer aided learning, competency based/critical thinking, correspondence course, and video/audio instruction as correspondence in our delivery modes.

Through long-term development and use of these modes, we have learned ways to approach the wide variety of situations that come up when students are not seen "in person." These situations have included, but are not limited to: grading, sense of isolation, procrastination, lack of available resources in "home" communities, time-lines, "in-house" problems of getting materials to/from students in a timely fashion, response to telephone, e-mail, and written requests that may require more than a "quick" answer.

The issue of how to teach in unfamiliar technologies, how not to be "a talking head" for the linked courses is also of concern. What kind of responses can be given and how to student requests when the student is at a distant site; classroom control when no instructor at the distant site is fluent in the skills being offered.

Concern No. 1: Registration procedures/Financial Aid Forms
Registration often becomes a stumbling block for our students. Registering for financial aid, getting financial aid forms signed, registering for a class that is "closed" or requires an instructor signature, on-line registration that is "down", not receiving the college catalogue to identify the upcoming classes, being dropped from the system because they didn't know they had to pay their fees at a specific time – all of these are situations students have encountered. Often we find ourselves, as instructors, running forms over to the registration office, getting financial aid forms signed, "registering" the student through the system. Our experience of registration for the distance learner is that it is often becomes a barricade for the students. However, since distance learning, especially our program's unique type, is new, we are "unraveling" the knots.

Response: We continue to try to work closely with the registration office, the counselors, and financial aid to make distance learning a viable and easily worked through option for students. This may require retraining once a year on the difficulties students face. It may also require continued visits to the financial aid offices, working with them as to how best meet the needs of the learner who cannot come to campus. There are several federal and state regulations that must be met, and all of us are trying to find ways to do that as well as make the college accessible for all learners.

Concern No. 2: Isolation

One of the first concerns is the student working in isolation. If he/she is working from their home, with access to a television or video camera (both a necessity in our

program), there still is the problem of working alone. What we have seen is that the acquisition of skills happens more readily and more accurately when students work together. Because the student in isolation often has no one to practice with, to watch and learn from, his/her progress may be slower.

Response: Often what we have found helps is to link this student up with an on-campus student (or another student in isolation) and have them develop a correspondence with each other (in our case, this would be done is sign language on a video, practicing the appropriate vocabulary and techniques). If this is done with a student on-campus, the instructor can monitor a little more closely for errors made in work production. It has been very helpful for the "far-away" student to feel more attached to someone in our local vicinity.

Concern No. 3: No "in home/community" resources

Many students have little or no resources in their community or in their home that are from this profession. Although some have access to inter-net resources, not all do. We do not assume that students have access to library resources when they sign up for classes. Although some have access to a local or school library, many of those libraries do not have resources, other than inter-net, available to assist the student.

Response: When a student contacts us, we will provide them with up-to-date web sites, but we will also include materials in their mail out packets to help them do research for the topics in the field they must read about, review, and summarize or do a research paper for. For two of the classes, there are packets made up (one or two quarters early) that can be mailed to the students who need additional assistance.

Concern No. 4: Written Mail Requests

When mail requests for information are received on campus, they are often circulated through several hands before they come to the appropriate program. This may happen more frequently for information requests at the beginning of each quarter than during the quarter. However, when students send their work back to the college, if they have not written the correct address, included the Mail Stop or the name of the instructor, those materials will often be delayed in reaching the program. As a consequence, the student may find their materials are late, delayed, or not returned to them as quickly as they would like. Also, because our program requires videotapes to be mailed, the tapes may be lost or injured in the mail.

Response: We have developed packets for "distance learning" information requests that include business cards as part of the procedure. In addition, when we receive the first set of materials from the students, the secretary types up labels for the students' homes and labels for them to put on materials that are sent to us. We encourage students to write their names or put mailing labels on their videotapes and audiotapes, and if we receive any that do not have that, we will put it on ourselves. This cannot compensate for tapes lost or destroyed in the mail, however. We have not been able to find a solution for that problem except to ask the students to do the lesson again and send it back in.

Concern No. 5: E-mails or Phone calls for help

As we all know, returning phone calls and e-mails can be quite time consuming. Students will often call and not leave call back numbers; they may call and need help ASAP; they may call and not leave a "best time" to return the call. Because of the nature of our program, students often need voice-mail contact so we can verbally explain to them how to use their hands to form the signs more appropriately. Leaving messages on student phones is often not a solution that works because we are not able to answer their questions without discussion. E-mails work for specific kinds of questions (When are things due? How should I write this sentence? Which paper did you say I should use?), but will not work for processing questions.

Response: No ideal solution here! Although getting back to students is a priority, we know that it will require constant vigilance to do so. Two of us will often share student concerns and whoever has more time will do phone calls.

Concern No. 6: Video problems

Our particular program is dependent upon videotapes and videotaping equipment. There are many difficulties that happen to the videotape materials sent to us, to those sent to the students, and to the equipment. Students must have access to equipment that will allow videotaping to occur on a regular (weekly or more frequent) basis. That equipment must produce a clear picture so the student can be evaluated. Lighting must be appropriate so the student can be seen and their hands are clear. We have received videotapes where the backdrop lights (window, floor lamps, filmed outdoors) make it nearly impossible to view the hands of the person signing.

Videotapes may be scratched, dented, or completely mutilated in the mail. They often reach us in unusable form. Or they may be returned to the student in non-usable form. The videotape may just quit working halfway through the lesson. If a student uses an old videotape and records over it several times, often the videotape becomes worn out.

There is a wide selection of video recorders on the market these days. Despite the fact that we instruct students to use specific sizes, we often have to send materials back un-graded because we do not have that particular size of tape "reader", or because the tape has been improperly produced.

Videotapes often are made in such a way that the student's hands do not appear in the screen, or they are so close to the camera that we can only see hands. Again, despite the instructions sent out, students do not often read and clearly understand what they need to do to produce the materials they need to for a grade.

Response: There are many problems that we are unable to resolve. If a tape is broken, scratched or in some other way made un-readable, we can only return the damaged tape to the student with a request they do the lesson again. If the student is improperly seated or canned be viewed in the television screen, we will again return the video with suggestions on how to make it more appropriate for what is needed. Often we will have a work-study student or a student doing her/his practicum work demonstrate on the student video how to appropriately film their work. If the video has been made with inappropriate backdrop lighting, we will ask the student to review their tape again and see

what they find difficult about viewing it. We find, often, the students do not review their work so they are not familiar with what can be seen or not seen on the TV screen.

Concern No. 7: Audio tapes
Our program does depend on students using both audio and videotapes. We encounter problems of background noises, unclear voices, tapes not rewinding, and improper use of the tapes for their work. The assumption that all students know how to use a tape recorder was quickly proved false early on. In addition, tapes now come in a variety of sizes and we must make sure we have all accommodations or request the students to send an adapter with their tapes.

Response: This response is very similar to that of the videotape issue. Often we will ask students to listen to the audiotape and determine what they can do to make the voice on it more clearly understood. We have returned audiotapes with letters attached, with another audiotape with our messages on it; we have sent videos with demonstration as to how more appropriately use an audiotape recorder for educational purposes. We may call the student or email the student with explanations of what we have encountered. If the audiotape is damaged or lost in the mail, we will ask the student to re-record the material. They often are unhappy with this option because it means more work on their part. Our response is similar to "lost papers" – there are very few other options available.

Concern No. 8: Laser disc and computer testing foul ups
As part of our program, we use laser discs for part of some of the student work. Those discs were pressed specifically for our program and include someone signing as well as tests about the material that was presented. Many of our students are not computer literate and are not familiar with how to set up their work on the computer.

We also use computer testing, without laser discs as part of the competency based aspect of our classes. The computer-testing situation must be monitored, up-dated and followed closely. What we have found is that making sure the computer testing lab pulls up the right test, has the right answers (accepts the answers that are being typed in), working with the "bugs" of on-line, with drive systems, and making the necessary changes in the test when it is found that there are errors is often a logistical nightmare for us.

Response: The video-laser disc option is a wonderful way to use several instructional media at the same time. However, it is costly to do and costly to repair. We have determined that a more easily managed option is video with accompanying tests. As for computerized testing, that requires a specialized person on an on-going basis to deal with all of the various computer problems that can occur. That is outside of our instructional realm, but does fit with the goal of the college. It does require us to be constantly aware of the problems that are occurring and to be in close contact with the computer support and computer maintenance departments. We have often resorted to paper copies of the test being continually available for students when the systems go down, when they are pulling up the wrong tests, or when the test materials have become garbled for whatever reason. Students often prefer the paper-pencil type rather than be frustrated with the computerized system.

Concern No. 10: Feedback

Providing feedback to students is one of our primary concerns. We will often give feedback to the students directly onto their videotape. That means the student will be instructed to watch their own video when they receive it back. The pitfall for that is that often the student does not watch the feedback and so the same or similar mistakes are made in the student's next production. We may also develop an audiotape that responds directly to what the student needs to do, from our perspective. We provide written feedback that the student may or may not read. Students ask for more – they often call and want to talk over their lessons. Finding the right time to call back, to return calls when the student has not left a number, or to try to help the student understand palm orientation and movement (a kinesthetic lesson) by "talking them through it" is often quite difficult.

Students accepting feedback is another related issue. Some students do not "listen" well to suggestions for their improved work. Others fail to make the changes even after they have bee provided with several forms of feedback. We find that distance learners seem to have a more difficult time incorporating the suggestions into their work than do the "in-class" students. Perhaps they understand it less than do those who can "see it" in use directly in front of them in the room. Learning a visual language through video and audio means often requires for students to not only have an open mind, but to have more visual-oriented learning styles.

Response: We have tried several methods of providing feedback. Responding on e-mail is one way; phone calls after and/or before students receive their materials back from us has been useful. If we pair the distant student up with another on-campus student for telephone correspondence, we sometimes see a change. Sending videos back with suggestions, done visually and spoken (becoming the on-video-teacher) has been useful in many instances. For the student who does not accept or incorporate suggestions well, we continue to work with that student as long as we can. In many cases, the student may decide to withdraw from the program rather than change his/her way of doing the work.

Concern No. 9: Time lines of mail backs

Because we are in a system where we do not have control of "immediate" mail outs, we must depend upon the campus mail service for getting mail back to students. Due to the number of mail-backs we do each week, we have found several problems. (We usually process over 100 distance learning student materials each week, with only two of us who can do them.) First and foremost is making sure the materials are corrected the day they are received, or by the next day's latest mail pick-up. Second is the amount of time it takes to put the return materials in envelopes, addressing them, and getting them out at the appropriate mail pick up time.

Response: We have enlisted the assistance of a work-study student to prepare the materials for return mail, including addressing envelopes, etc. We have also had mailing

labels made each quarter for those students who identified themselves as "mail-back" students. This has helped considerably, although we have found that often the work-study students may not always do this assignment in a timely fashion. The secretarial staff has provided some assistance when possible, but that will depend upon their other duties. We still haven't found an ideal solution for the number of students and the faculty-response-time.

Concern No. 11: Bookstore issues
Books and workbooks may not be available at the campus bookstore in timely fashion. Due to more requests for materials than at first believed, printing delays or shelving errors, we often find our distance learners get their materials one or two weeks later than other students. We are up-grading materials on a regular basis. (We have produced 19 workbooks for our courses and try to work on at least 2 per year for changes to make the materials more "user-friendly.") The Bookstore will often have difficulty in determining whether or not the previous editions can be sold to students. If there are several copies of the old workbooks in the bookstore, and they cannot be sold, this becomes a financial burden for our programs. In addition, in our program, instructor developed competency-based workbooks different for classroom students than for distance learners in three or four of the courses. The bookstore personnel may not always be aware of which materials the students need to have.

Response: This is an on-going issue for us. When we make changes in workbooks, we try to make sure the bookstore is informed about whether or not the old workbooks can be sold. We try to make the changes available on insert sheets for those workbooks that are in stock. We have a close working relationship with the director of the bookstore, so that we can call or "run-over" and have a quick discussion about the issues that are up. We have tried to anticipate the enrollments as closely as we can, but we are often "off the mark" and work as quickly as we can to help the bookstore fill the need for materials.

Concern No. 12: Wrong materials sent
A Distance Learning program often involves many individuals in order to make it work. There may be secretarial assistance, work-study assistants, library media personnel, mailroom clerks, bookstore employees, who are all involved in this process, as well as faculty both full and part-time. Because there are so many individuals, getting the process streamlined is often quite difficult. One of the difficulties we face every quarter is getting the right materials sent to the right students. Because we have well over 125 students enrolled in a wide variety of distance learning classes, this often becomes a logistics problem. Students may receive workbooks for the wrong class, wrong videotapes, or incomplete sets of videos. By the time they are re-issued materials, they are one to three weeks behind.

Response: We have determined that a late start date for students due to wrong materials can only be relieved by giving them a couple of extra days to help make up the work. We cannot eliminate any of the assignments, as they are all skill building upon the previous assignment. Often we will have extra copies in our offices for "emergency" mail-outs until the correct materials are sent. This is not a problem that has been resolved to our

satisfaction, nor do we anticipate that it will be fully resolved as long as we have so many students, wide choices of classes with their accompanying materials.

Concern No. 13: Start date/distance learning date for mail out
The telecourse/distance learning office and the video/audio materials department may often get the materials to students one or two weeks later than the dates the students in the classroom get to start. The "due dates" on the materials are often then confusing to the students. We receive phone calls from frantic students who have already missed due dates before their materials arrive. Because we do telecourse, downlink, on-line, and tape rental courses, there are many different ways these materials can be sent out late. We often must extend the school year calendar one week to accommodate the distance learners. This means, their grades may not be posted at the same time as other students, or not in a timely fashion.

Response: Again, no suitable, easily resolved issue here. The late start date often means we will be issuing grades past the due-dates. We know that means extra work on our part as well on as the registration department's part, but until all of the "time" lines can be met in each department, this is the only option we have.

Concern No. 14: Satellite sites/workbooks
Our campus has several satellite campuses. Students on those campuses who register for our classes do so through the regular registration at their local sites. The workbooks and textbooks for them are often received at their local sites. Some of our experiences include the selling of out-dated workbooks to the students, so their materials are different than those of the regular student. There may not be enough workbooks for the number of students enrolled. Students often try to share workbooks rather than each buy their own, so the papers they send in do not have task, pages, or chapter numbers on them. If two or three students at a distant site are working together on their materials, they will often make the same errors, turn in materials that are "blatantly" similar, and then be upset if they are asked to do individual work. They find it hard to work through their materials as distance learners if there is not an assistant or technical person at their site.

Response: We often need to work closely with the outlying areas and their registration offices. Our bookstore also has to work with them, keeping them abreast of all of the changes in materials. If an out-dated workbook has been sold to the students, we try to send them pages to replace the most crucial of their assignments so their work is similar to others. If students are sharing workbooks, when we return their papers to them, we use bright, bold colored ink to indicate task, pages, or chapter numbers with a note to have them make sure they are included in the next assignment. We also encourage students to buy the workbook themselves, but we cannot regulate that. If two or three students at a distant site have done their materials together and they contain work that is "blatantly" similar, we will either return the work and ask them to create their own sentences or stories as they were asked to do in the first place. If it happens again, we simply flunk the student on that assignment just as if they were in class and turned in papers that were similar.

Concern No. 15: Lab hours for distance learners to come on campus
As budgets have become tighter, the campus lab hours have changed considerably. Students who work during the day often wish to come to the lab and do some of their work in their evening or weekend hours. Our lab hours have been cut drastically and will continue to be so, due to financial situations. In addition, faculty and lab technical people may not be available during the evening or the weekend hours. So the distance learner may have access to the equipment in the lab, but not to personnel.

Response: Because of tighter budgets and monetary concerns, this particular issue does not have, at this time, a viable solution. Students who have chosen to work full-time and to try to complete their degree in their "off-hours" are at a disadvantage. We have asked for volunteers from the community (previous students who are now working full or part-time in the field) to offer assistance to these beginners. At one level, this is a nice way to connect new students with possible mentors. At another level, this is not as adequate as working with an instructor. Ideal would be to have a part-time or full-time instructor whose work is dedicated to distance learners and who would be available in the evening and weekend hours.

Concern No. 16: Procrastination
Since students come in a wide variety of learning styles and learning applications, we have found that for some, distance learning has been a timely challenge. Despite "due dates" and "points taken off" warnings, there are students who will send all their lessons in at one time. (We make sure the policy of deduction of points from their work is clearly stated in the syllabus and in the letter of confirmation and identification of dates when work is due.) In a setting where skills build upon each other, the problems created by their procrastination may be many. If they have misunderstood directions, if they have failed to comprehend grammar structure, or if they have difficulties doing manual manipulations, they may often fail each of their lessons.

Response: We have found a few workable solutions for this dilemma. At the beginning of every quarter, the instructors phone each of the students enrolled in the distance learning classes and have conversations about "getting started", "timeliness" and how to get assistance. This personal touch has helped considerably in getting students to send in their first lessons in a more timely fashion. Usually, if they can get moving on lessons one and two, they are more likely to submit the remainder of the lessons in a more timely fashion. The phone calling is very time consuming (we may have more than 100 students as distance learners), but the benefit to us and to the students is worth it. Despite the personal contact, we always have lessons turned in at the last, and we always have students who do their lessons very well, but who receive less that a "C" (2.0) because of the points taken off for the late work.

Conclusion
Alternatives to in-class skill development are necessary, can be done well, and will have positive outcomes. They will also require extra work on the part of the instructor, a willingness to accept alternative learning styles and approaches as reality, and a high

incentive to work with all students. Our distance learners have been pleased they do not have to quit their jobs, leave their homes and families, and move to our local campus. Many of them have become better employed in their hometowns. Local rural communities are pleased because they have local people who are already in their town who are now upgrading their skills. Rural communities often find it difficult to hire new graduates because those graduates do not want to move into out-lying, rural and isolated communities. Distance learning has solved several of those kinds of problems.

We will continue to provide distance learning and we will continue to work on the problems we have encountered.

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